



News Release

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Was Lincoln a Scrooge?

Presidential Library and Museum blog examines how Christmas was (or was not) celebrated in the Lincoln White House

SPRINGFIELD - The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum Blog “From out of the Top Hat” has a wonderful entry today about the Lincolns and Christmas titled “Scrooge Lincoln?” It talks about how Christmas was just like any other day in the Lincoln White House and the President, like Scrooge, saw no reason for the family and staff to act differently on that day. The blog is at www.alplm.org/blog, is updated every Monday, and additional topic suggestions are always welcome.

The text of the blog is copied below.

Scrooge Lincoln?

December 20, 2010

by Dr. Thomas F. Schwartz, Illinois State Historian

The memorable holiday character of Ebenezer Scrooge from Charles Dickens’s 1843 classic *A Christmas Carol* brought into popular usage the phrase “Bah! Humbug!” Scrooge went beyond ignoring the holiday. He believed it to be a conspiracy of slackers to get a day off from work. “A poor excuse for picking a man’s pocket every twenty-fifth of December,” exclaimed Scrooge. Ultimately, Scrooge’s problem was his inability to embrace the spirit of the season that also included reconnecting with friends, family, and the less fortunate. The Scrooge model is supported by a recent study suggesting that the higher one’s socioeconomic status, the lower the “empathic accuracy.” In other words, one becomes less attuned to the needs of others. In the triumphal ending, Scrooge’s change of heart also allows for the future of individuals such as Tiny Tim to change as well.

There is little evidence that Abraham Lincoln celebrated Christmas in ways that Charles Dickens's novella helped advance: Holiday dinner, a Yule log, the exchange of presents, stockings by the fireplace, and a decorated tree. Subscribing to earlier Protestant traditions of visiting friends at New Year's, the Lincolns apparently never embraced the emerging Victorian symbols of celebration.

Looking at what is firmly documented for Lincoln's activities on December 25, we find most of his time spent on letter-writing and, throughout the presidency, dealing with affairs of state. While serving in the Illinois Legislature in Vandalia, Lincoln voted against adjourning for Christmas. While serving in the United States House of Representatives, Lincoln spent the 1848 holiday straightening out an old legal issue with his friend Joshua Speed, ending the letter, "Nothing of consequence new here, beyond what you see in the papers."

December 25, 1861 offers two different views of the Lincoln family. It is clear that the Lincoln boys spent the day with the Taft family. Daughter Julia would frequently bring over her brothers Bud and Holly to play with Willie and Tad Lincoln. She later gave a series of lectures at the Chicago Historical Society (now the Chicago History Museum) about her memories of the Lincoln Executive Mansion. These lectures were published as a book, *Tad Lincoln's Father* (1931). Julia's father, Horatio Nelson Taft, kept a diary and recorded this for Wednesday, December 25, 1861: "It has been quite a noisey day about the house. Our three boys and the Two Lincoln boys have been very busy firing off Crackers & Pistols. Willie & Thomas Lincoln staid to Dinner at 4 o'clock." Meantime, Abraham and Mary Lincoln were entertaining friends from Kentucky and Illinois as well as some members of his cabinet. Orville Hickman Browning, who was appointed to serve out the remainder of the Senate seat of the late Stephen A. Douglas, was at this dinner. There is nothing in his diary entry to suggest holiday flair. It was during this time that diplomatic difficulties with England, over the seizure of two Confederate diplomats from the British mail packet *Trent*, were at a climax. According to Browning, Lincoln pulled him aside following the dinner and reassured him that problems over the *Trent* affair had been amicably resolved.

That it was business as usual at the Executive Mansion on December 25, 1861 is suggested by private secretary John Nicolay. Writing to his fiancée Thérèse Bates, Nicolay jokes: "John [Hay] and I are moping the day away here in our offices like a couple of great owls in their holes, and expect in an hour or two to go down to Willards and get our 'daily bread' just as we do on each of the other three hundred and sixty four days of the year." Once again, the New Year's reception served as the most significant holiday on the White House social calendar.

Lincoln received all sorts of gifts throughout the year. A specific Christmas gift was sent by telegram on Tuesday, December 20, 1864:

To His Excellency President Lincoln:

I beg to present you as a Christmas gift the city of Savannah, with one hundred and fifty heavy guns and plenty of ammunition, also about twenty-five thousand bales of cotton.

W.T. Sherman
Major-General

Undoubtedly one of the most unusual gifts was sent a few weeks before December 25, 1864 by the famed hunter and mountain man Seth Kinman. Sporting buckskin and long unkempt hair to match a long bushy beard, Kinman began presenting chairs made from animal bones and skins to presidents beginning with James Buchanan and continuing at least through Rutherford B. Hayes. On November 26, 1864 Kinman visited Lincoln in Washington to present a chair made from elk horns. Alfred Waud, an artist and illustrator, captured the scene in a drawing now at the Library of Congress. Lincoln is seen examining Kinman's rifle, with the elk horn chair in the background. Clearly, Lincoln was amused by his unusual visitor, who also played two songs for the president on a violin made from the skull of his mule, Dave.

The chair eventually was given by Robert Todd Lincoln to Clinton Lloyd, a friend of Kinman and Chief Clerk of the House of Representatives. It eventually was passed on to his son, George B. Lloyd of Springfield, Illinois, where it was displayed on several occasions and then disappeared. Like so many unusual holiday gifts such as gaudy ties, snow globes, and overly imaginative mugs and tea sets, the elk horn chair, one might hope, has been re-gifted with the possibility of resurfacing some day.

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